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Population Bulletin

Delayed Childbearing in the U.S.: Facts and Fictions

*By Wendy H. Baldwin and
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Abstract—Between 1970 and 1982, the proportion of first births in the U.S. to women 25 and older rose from 19 to 36 percent and the proportion of women still childless at ages 25-34 increased by 56 percent at about the same time. Although a sharp contrast with the baby boom era of the 1950s and 1960s, today's "epidemic" of delayed childbearing is similar to patterns earlier in the 20th century. As then, much is due to delayed marriage, but baby boomers now in their late twenties and early thirties are also delaying childbirth after marriage. The trend stems in part from their economic difficulties as they compete in a tight job market caused both by their large numbers and a turbulent economy. But it is also related to women's increasing education and, in turn, increasing opportunities in and commitment to the labor force, which can be expected to encourage delayed childbearing even after prospects brighten for young people. Although a diverse group, most of today's delayed childbearers are white, highly educated, two-career couples. Adequate daytime care for preschool children is a prime concern. Although more employers now offer child-care assistance and flexible work schedules to working parents, the juggle between jobs and childraising can be a strain. On the plus side are delayed childbearers' greater maturity and generally higher incomes, which can ease potential problems created by parent-child age differences as their children grow up. Businesses have been quick to respond to the new market of older, affluent, first-time mothers. New methods of treating or circumventing infertility and prenatal detection of chromosomal birth defects can now help overcome potential biological problems that may concern women who choose to delay childbearing past age 30.

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ALL DELIVERIES
IN REAR



Delayed Childbearing in the U.S.: Facts and Fictions

By Wendy H. Baldwin and Christine Winqvist Nord

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Headlines trumpet the story: "After-30 Motherhood at Epidemic Proportions"; "Panic is Sweeping a Generation of Women Getting Too Old to Have Children."

The baby boomers of the 1950s, whose deferred childbearing created the baby bust of the 1970s, are now producing babies. Many of the record number of American women now in their late twenties and thirties, who put off childbearing to compete in the tight job market of the 1970s and early 1980s, are deciding that the time to have a baby is now. Others, still childless, worry how long they dare race the biological clock. Although exaggerated by the media, delayed childbearing has indeed become the U.S. fertility phenomenon of the 1980s. It succeeds the unprecedented baby boom of 1947-1964 and the baby bust of the early and mid-1970s, and is part of the unexpectedly postponed and still faint "echo baby boom" since then.

Consider these facts:

- Since the early 1970s, first birth rates for U.S. women aged 25 to 39 have increased steadily, while the rates for younger women have declined. The most dramatic increase has been for women aged 30-34, with a doubling from 7.3 first births per 1,000 women this age in 1970 to 14.6 in 1982.
- In 1982, first births to women 25 and older accounted for 36 percent of all first births in the United States; in 1970, the proportion was only 19 percent.
- Between 1970 and 1981, the proportion of women still childless at ages 25-34 rose 56 percent—from 18 to 28 percent.

- Some researchers predict that as many as 28 percent of American women born in the 1950s will never bear children. Only about 9 percent of women born in the 1930s—the mothers of the baby boom generation—were childless at age 40.

- Ninety-one percent of married white women over 30 who became first-time mothers in 1980 held a paid job. Half were professionals, but more than a third were working in sales, clerical, or service jobs.

- Involuntary childlessness—the inability to conceive—does increase with a woman's age. But estimates of this increase range widely, from 9 to nearly 40 percent unable to conceive at ages 30-35 and 20 to 44 percent at ages 35 to about 40, and most of these estimates are based on studies of historical populations. New methods for treating infertility and better health are now helping many older women—and men—overcome biological problems that hampered delayed childbearing in the past.

In earlier times, delayed childbearing was accomplished by delayed marriage. Older ages at marriage are contributing to the current trend, but it is also related to other changes in U.S. society. Some of these are short-term. Economic difficulties caused both by their sheer numbers and a turbulent economy have forced many of the baby boom generation to postpone marriage as well as parenthood. With so many of them, competition for jobs was fierce as they entered the labor market in the 1970s. Combined with the recessions of 1974-75, 1979-80, and 1980-81, the result has been lower income, even for the rapidly increasing number of two-earner families, just as inflation and soaring costs have escalated the prices of the larger apartments or new homes sought by would-be parents.

But other changes that encourage delayed childbearing seem here to stay. The paid work force, once overwhelmingly male, in 1984 was 43 percent female. Fifty-three percent of married women age 16 and over were working or

looking for a job outside the home in 1984, more than double the 24 percent of 1950. The family, although still a basic institution, is changing.¹ The typical family of the 1950s with a mother who stayed home to raise children while the father supported the family is now a shrinking minority. The number of unmarried couples living together more than tripled from 1970 to nearly 1.9 million in 1984. If current divorce rates continue, half of all recent first marriages will end in divorce.² And the average American is better educated than ever before.

The lives of American men and women are being dramatically affected by these changes. Where once women were expected to marry and concentrate on raising children, they now have many alternatives open to them. Where once men were almost alone in the work place, they now share it with women. Formerly the sole providers for their families, men are now more likely to share that responsibility with their wives. These changes are affecting the relations between men and women both within and outside of marriage.³ And decisions to postpone marriage and/or childbearing are now more feasible with the advent of legal abortion and widespread use of effective contraceptives.

With all these changes it seems likely that delayed childbearing will remain a feature of American society. Well-documented information on the current trend is scanty, however, and misperceptions persist. In this *Bulletin*, we draw on diverse sources of data to illustrate how widespread delayed childbearing now is, where it fits among fertility patterns during this century, and how it differs from delayed childbearing in the past. Among the questions we ask are: What are the medical and health risks associated with delayed childbearing? How is it related to voluntary and involuntary childlessness? Who delays and why? How are the new, older mothers—most of whom return to work shortly after their children are born—and their employers accommodating to the juggle between job and

childraising? What are the implications of delayed childbearing for family life and American society? How does the U.S. experience compare with that of other developed countries? And how likely is it that the trend will last?

What Is Delayed Childbearing?

Everybody talks about "delayed childbearing" but just exactly what do we mean by the expression? The media and the public frequently assume that it refers to a first birth after a woman turns 30, but often are not explicit about the age cutoff and whether or not second and later births are also included in the definition.

In this *Bulletin*, "delayed childbearing" will mean delayed entry into parenthood, that is, the timing of the *first* birth in parents' lives. This definition excludes other interesting but complex possibilities. Consider, for example, a couple who have their first child in their early twenties but delay the second until their mid-thirties. In a sense they have started over again. The second family of a remarried divorced person, with a different spouse, can also seem like a new beginning, particularly for divorced and remarried men, whom, research suggests, tend to lose contact over time with their former families.⁴ By eliminating these variations, however, we narrow the focus to a clearly measurable group.

For many, the first birth is qualitatively different from later births. For sociologists, it marks the entry of individuals into the roles of mother or father. To economists, it means an increase and shift in the pattern of couples' expenditures. Psychologists stress that it involves psychological and emotional adjustments for parents which are not as great at the birth of a second or third child.⁵

Then there is the question of how to determine the age cutoff that divides older from younger first-time mothers. In adolescent childbearing, the important

question is at what age do young women cease being adolescent. In delayed childbearing, the important one is at what age do women *start* being delayers. For both groups, gradations of age are of interest. Childbearing at the youngest and oldest ages, though rarer, is of special concern because of the increased health risks. In 1982 in the U.S., there were 9,327 first births to girls under age 15 and 2,581 to women aged 40 and older.

With adolescent childbearing there is a sense that children come too soon, or to women who are too young. With delayed childbearing, do children come too late, or to women who are too old? The assumption in both cases is that there is some best or normal range to begin childbearing. Certainly for very young teenagers, research has shown that waiting a while longer to begin childbearing is better for both the parent and the child. However, little research has looked at whether older is better throughout the childbearing years.

Is it appropriate to term births "late" or "early"? How does one decide which births are "on time"? A sociologist and an obstetrician may have quite different views about what is a late first birth. To a sociologist, any delay past a typical age (early twenties in the U.S.) may signal that men's and women's lives are changing in important ways. Obstetricians, however, do not usually become concerned about the age of a first-time mother—barring any special medical problem she may have—until a woman is at least 35. Even then there is disagreement over whether she is at substantially higher risk than a younger woman. In order to address the social as well as medical aspects, we define delayed childbearing as the initiation of childbearing at age 25 or older.

A definition of delayed childbearing could include other issues beyond age and birth order. For example, does delay imply a conscious decision to defer childbearing past the age a woman originally expected to begin her family? If a couple encounters a fertility problem that

Table 1. First Births to U.S. Women: 1970 and 1982

Age of mother	1970			1982		
	Number of first births	Percent of total first births	Rate of first births per 1,000 women in age group	Number of first births	Percent of total first births	Rate of first births per 1,000 women in age group
Total women, 15-49	1,430,680 ^a	100.0	34.2 ^b	1,555,627 ^a	100.0	28.6 ^b
15-19	498,388	34.8	53.7	395,507	25.4	41.0
20-24	652,530	45.6	78.2	588,979	37.9	54.7
25-29	212,102	14.8	31.2	396,620	25.5	38.4
30-34	42,404	3.0	7.3	136,814	8.8	14.6
35-39	11,704	0.8	2.1	25,799	1.7	3.3
40-44	2,442	0.2	0.4	2,498	0.2	0.4
45-49	178	0.01	0.0	83	0.005	0.0

Sources: 1970: National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), "Summary Report, Final Natality Statistics, 1970," *Monthly Vital Statistics Report*, Vol. 22, No. 12, Supplement, March 20, 1974, Tables 2 and 3; 1981: NCHS, "Advance Report of Final Natality Statistics, 1982," *Monthly Vital Statistics Report*, Vol. 33, No. 6, Supplement, September 28, 1984, Tables 2 and 3.

^aIncludes first births to women under 15: 10,932 in 1970; 9,327 in 1982.

^bRates computed by relating total first births, regardless of age of mother, to women aged 15-44.

is not resolved until the woman is in her thirties, does that constitute delayed childbearing? Is childbearing that follows promptly upon a delayed marriage the same kind of delay as childbearing that starts after a decade of marriage? This *Bulletin* alludes to some of these issues, but data necessary to disentangle the different reasons for delay are not generally available or available over time.

How Widespread and How Unusual?

In spite of all the recent attention, delayed childbearing is not at "epidemic" proportions in the U.S. In 1982 (the latest year for which data are available), there were 1,555,627 first births to women of all ages (see Table 1). Thirty-six percent—561,814—were to women 25 and older. Within this group, women aged 25-29 accounted for the vast majority—71 percent—or 26 percent of all first births. Another 8.8 percent (136,814) of all first births occurred to women aged 30-34. Only 28,380, or 1.8 percent of all first births, were to women 35 and older,

and only 83, or .005 percent, were to women 45 and older. First birth rates for women 25 and older were also modest in comparison with the rates for younger women. Even the first birth rate of 38.4 per 1,000 women aged 25-29 was well below the highest rate—the 54.7 per 1,000 for women aged 20-24—and the rate for women aged 35-39 was only 3.3 per 1,000 in 1982.

It is the increase in the numbers and rates of first births for women 25 and older since the early 1970s that has stimulated the current interest. Between 1970 and 1982, as Table 1 shows, the number of first births to women aged 25-49 more than doubled, rising from 268,830 to 561,814, and the percentage that these births represented of all first births nearly doubled—from 19 to 36. Most dramatic were the increases for women aged 30-34: their first births more than tripled, from 42,404 to 136,814, and their first birth rate doubled from 7.3 to 14.6 per 1,000 women.

Increasing numbers and rates of first births among older women do not necessarily mean that the *total* number of births to older women is increasing.

Table 2. Total Births and First Births to Women Age 25 and Over: 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980

Age of mother	1950		1960		1970		1980	
	Number (in 1,000s)	Percent of total	Number (in 1,000s)	Percent of total	Number (in 1,000s)	Percent of total	Number (in 1,000s)	Percent of total
All birth orders								
Total to women								
15-49	3,554	100	4,258	100	3,731	100	3,612	100
25-29	1,022	29	1,093	26	995	27	1,108	31
30-34	598	17	688	16	428	12	550	15
35 and over	373	11	457	11	233	6	165	5
First births								
Total to women								
15-49	1,089	100	1,090	100	1,431	100	1,546	100
25-29	221	20	141	13	212	15	372	24
30-34	81	7	50	5	42	3	113	7
35 and over	37	3	24	2	14	1	20	1

Sources: NCHS, *Vital Statistics of the United States 1950*, Vol. 2, *Marriage, Divorce, Natality, Fetal Mortality, and Infant Mortality* (1953) Table 28A, *Vital Statistics 1960*, Vol. 1, *Natality* (1963) Table 2-15, "Summary Report: Final Natality Statistics, 1970," *Monthly Vital Statistics Report*, Vol. 22, No. 12, Supplement, March 20, 1974, Table 2, and "Advance Report of Final Natality Statistics, 1980," *Monthly Vital Statistics Report*, Vol. 31, No. 8, Supplement, Nov. 30, 1982, Table 2.

Higher order births have decreased in the past two decades, especially third and later births, and most of these were to women 25 and older. Table 2 shows changes in the number and percentages of all births and of first births to women 25-29, 30-34, and 35 and over at ten-year intervals since 1950. Three years after the 1957 peak of the baby boom (when more than 4.3 million babies were born), in 1960, women 25 and older had 2.2 million births—53 percent of the 1960 total of just under 4.3 million births of all orders. In 1980, there were 1.8 million births to women these ages—51 percent of the total of 3.6 million. The trend for first births to women 25 and older was the reverse: from 215 thousand (20 percent of all first births) in 1960 to 505 thousand (32 percent of the total) in 1980.

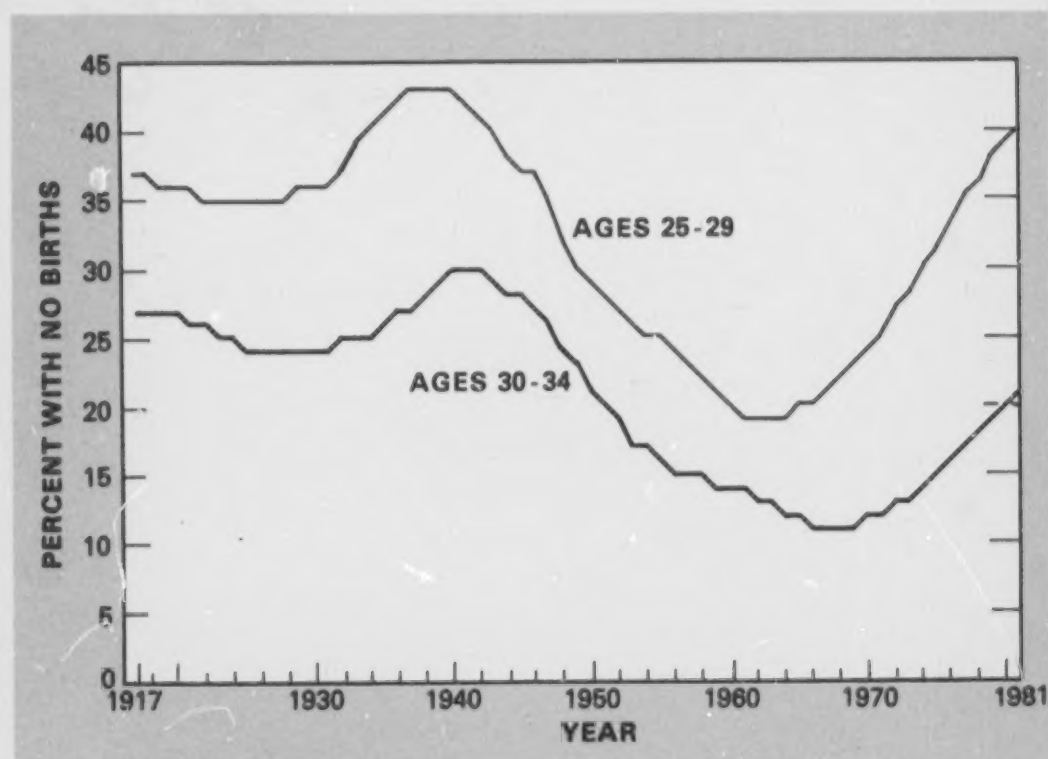
The percentages of all births or of first births that are to women of a given age are influenced by those women's own childbearing rates, the rates of other women, and the relative number of younger and older women in the childbearing population. While it may seem

confusing to think that numbers, rates, and percentages could tell different stories, that is unfortunately the case. The post-World War II baby boom created a bulge in the age structure of the U.S. population; there were one-third more babies born in the 1950s than in the decade before or after. The women of this cohort are, or will be, in their thirties in the 1980s and the extra-large size of the cohort alone means that these women currently have a disproportionate influence on the overall fertility picture. Thus, one must look at several indicators of fertility change to determine if American women really are delaying childbearing. One important indicator is change in childlessness among women in their late twenties and early thirties.

Childlessness and birth expectations

With delayed childbearing defined as delay in the onset of childbearing, there is obviously a close relationship with patterns of childlessness. Until the first birth, couples are childless and rarely know for

Figure 1. Percent of Women Still Childless at Ages 25-29 and 30-34: 1917-1981



Sources: Robert L. Heuser, *Fertility Tables for Birth Cohorts by Color: United States, 1917-1973* (Rockville, MD: NCHS, 1976), and annual updates to this publication available on tape from NCHS.

certain if they will remain childless or go on to have children. If they do have children at an older age, they are said to be "delayed childbearers." In other words, the category of childless includes many people who are temporarily childless, that is, childless at age 30 but not at age 35. A woman is not really permanently childless until menopause arrives without a birth or until she (or her partner) is sterilized without having had a child. A woman is not a delayed childbearer until she has had a first birth beyond some age which presumably divides older from younger first-time mothers. Thus, childlessness and delayed childbearing are intertwined. In fact, the reasons that cause a woman or a couple to postpone childbearing may be quite similar to those that lead them in the end to remain

child free.

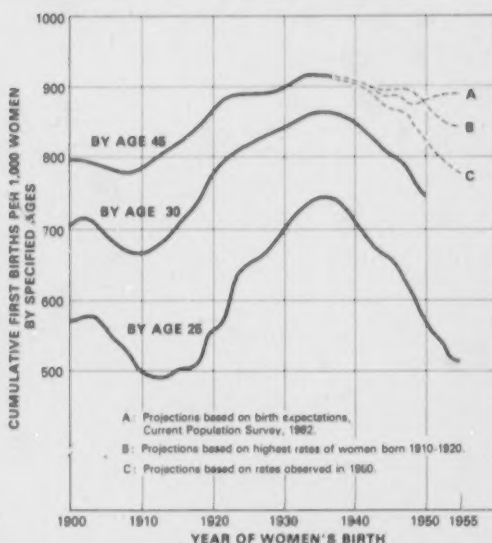
Between 1970 and 1981, the proportion childless among women in their late twenties and early thirties nearly doubled. In 1970, 24 percent of women aged 25-29 and 12 percent of women aged 30-34 had never had a child. By 1981, these proportions had increased to 40 and 21 percent. This steep rise is misleading, however. As Figure 1 shows, the proportion of women still childless in their late twenties was close to an all-time low in 1970. The high figure of 1981 for women aged 25-29 was still a bit lower than that of about 1940 at the end of the 1930s depression when more women of these ages had put off childbearing than ever before. These peaks are much closer to the level of childlessness among women in their late twenties in the

early part of the 20th century than are the low levels of the late 1960s. The proportion childless among women aged 30-34 in 1981 was about the same as it had been during most of this century. Thus, the current level of childlessness among women in their late twenties and early thirties is only unusual by comparison with the trend of the 1950s and 1960s.

The percentage of older childless women who say they expect to remain childless has dropped significantly since the mid-1970s, reflecting the growing number of women who are beginning childbearing at later ages. Among currently married childless women aged 30-34 queried in the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey, the proportion who said they expected to have no children dropped from 68 percent in 1976 to 53 percent in 1982.⁶ For widowed, divorced, and separated women of these ages the drop was from 83 to 72 percent.

Although American demographers have been notoriously inaccurate in their fertility forecasts during this century—none foresaw the size and length of the post-World War II baby boom—it is still interesting to speculate how likely it is that currently childless older women will have the children they say they expect. Demographer Arthur Campbell explored this by comparing women's birth expectations reported in the June 1982 Current Population Survey with past and current delayed childbearing trends. Of women age 26 in June 1982—those born in 1955—56 percent had already become mothers and another 33 percent said they expected to bear at least one child. To achieve this, however, these women's rates of first birth after age 25 will have to exceed the highest such rates ever observed in the U.S. These records were set by the women born between 1910 and 1920, whose "cumulative" rates of first birth were very low up to age 25 as they postponed childbearing during the depression of the 1930s, but soared after that age as they caught up during and

Figure 2. First Birth Rates by Ages 25, 30, and 45 of Women Born 1900-1955



Source: Calculations by Arthur Campbell, Center for Population Research, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, from cohort fertility tables of NCHS, available on tape.

after the war as the baby boom gained momentum. For example, if women age 26 in 1982 were to match the record of the 1915 cohort, only another 28 percent will have become mothers by age 45 instead of the 33 percent still childless in 1982 who said they expected to have at least one child. If these women experience the first birth rates for women age 26 and over observed in 1980, only 22 percent more will eventually become mothers (see Figure 2). Thus, unless these women reduce their expectations—which is certainly possible⁷—many are unlikely to become mothers although they say they intend to.

Of course, there is always the chance that these women will start bearing children after age 25 at higher rates than the 1910-1920 cohorts did, but this scenario is unlikely. Priorities will change for some and they will decide to forego childbearing. Others will encounter fertility problems. For most, future birth expect-

Are Women 30-34 Really Delaying Childbearing? A Seeming Paradox Explained

Between 1970 and 1980, the first birth rate for women aged 30-34 rose by 75 percent, from 7.3 to 12.8 first births per 1,000 women, and the number of first births to women this age went up 166 percent, from 42,404 to 112,964. Yet the first birth *probability* for women this age increased only from 61.5 to 64.9 per 1,000. The rates and numbers suggest that women in their early thirties are having many more first births than their counterparts did in 1970, but the probabilities indicate that childless women aged 30-34 were only slightly more likely to have a first birth in 1980 than they were in 1970. How can both of these facts be true?

The first birth rate for women aged 30-34 is the number of first births to women 30-34 divided by the total number of women in that age group. The first birth probability for women 30-34 is the number of first births to women 30-34 divided by the total number of *childless* women in that age group. The rate can rise because of two different processes. There can be an increase in the likelihood that a childless woman that age will bear a child, that is, the probability of a first birth can increase. Or, there can be an increase in the number of women who remain childless until they pass 30 and then experience the same probability of childbirth as in earlier times. In the U.S., it is the second process that is causing the current increase in both the number and rate of first births among women in their early thirties. The probability of having a first birth at that age has remained virtually unchanged over the past decade.

What these apparently discrepant facts do tell us is that the interesting fertility issue for the 1980s is understanding the forces that lead vastly more women to remain childless until their thirties. Not only is a greater proportion of women remaining childless to at least age 30, but also the baby boom bulge in the U.S. population means that the number of women in their twenties rose sharply during the 1970s. So, a larger population of women in their twenties, greater likelihood that they would remain childless during their twenties, and then similar birth probabilities once they pass age 30 have combined to give us the increased rate and number of first births to women aged 30-34.

tations depend on their being married. However, some of the currently married women will separate or divorce, and some currently unmarried women will not find a suitable partner and for that reason will forego childbearing. Harvard economist David Bloom predicts that as many as 29 percent of white women and 20 percent of nonwhite women born during the 1950s will never bear children.⁸

Who are those couples who ultimately remain childless? Obviously, not all are childless by choice. Women who actively prevent pregnancy because they are not yet married are voluntarily childless in one sense, and yet might prefer to have children if they had a suitable mate. Similarly, many couples may be prompted by economic circumstances to postpone a birth that they might prefer to have now,

and some of these may for this reason end up with no children. There are also couples who are unsure whether they want children. We assume that all these couples are able to have children if they so desire. There are, of course, those couples who are physically unable to bear children; they are considered later.

Thus, it can be seen that the currently childless are a diverse group. Ideally, to understand the different facets of childlessness, those who are simply deferring births should be distinguished from couples and women who will be childless at the end of their reproductive lives. Further, it would be useful to separate couples who do not want children from those who forego, or give up, having children; their motivations and desires are quite different. In practice, however, these dis-